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Black Hawk and White Men

The central fact of American history is the Westward Movement — that stupendous dramatic action whereby in the span of a single long human life the whole vast region from the Appalachians to the Pacific was subdued and occupied by the white race: in the years of the Revolution, the first trickle of settlers across the mountains into Tennessee and Kentucky; a century later, the United States cavalry rounding up the last surviving Sioux and Apaches into reservations, and the continent transformed into one vast farm and workshop.

A central theme of that great drama is the conflict of cultures incidental to the displacement of red men by white. James Fenimore Cooper, America's first major novelist, grasped and fully developed this theme more than a century and a quarter ago. In his great Leatherstocking Tales, and especially in his little-known but excellent novel, *The Oak Openings*, we have clearly seen and deeply felt all the tragedy, the rare comedy and frequent irony, of the sustained and bloody contest between the races for possession of the land. In his pages are all the representative (and often repeated) characters of the drama: the white man

who knows and respects the Indians and is respected and trusted by them, and the rum-dispensing trader; the missionary who labors to save the Indians' souls and the "Indian hater" who collects their scalps; the settler hungry for land and heedless of Indian rights and claims, and the military leader unhappily trying to execute, with whatever degree of justice and mercy may be possible, the social mandate of "manifest destiny." The writers who have followed Cooper in recognition and treatment of this theme are legion, and some among them belong to Iowa.

Iowa's stake in the great theme of the conflict between red and white centers in the person of a single Indian, Black Hawk, war chief of the Sauk tribe. Iowa's claim is attested by a county name and by the memorials on the bluffs along the Mississippi. What is now Iowa was ceded by the Sauk and Fox after the Black Hawk War in 1832, and was known for a time as the Black Hawk Purchase. As a matter of fact, Iowa's interest in the Black Hawk story is to some degree that of a residual legatee. The cornfields and village sites for which Black Hawk fought — the traditional homeland of the Sauk — were east of the Mississippi. The Iowa prairies were their hunting grounds. However, the conviction that Black Hawk belongs to Iowa — jointly with Illinois and Wisconsin — is firmly fixed in many Iowa minds; and I feel justified in including novels about Black

Hawk in our survey even though they may touch only obliquely or incidentally what are Iowa territory and history in the precise sense. The famous chieftain's autobiography, reprinted by the State Historical Society of Iowa, is one of the most interesting of the autobiographical works which we shall be considering in a later article in this series.

The most stringent demand upon the writer who attempts to deal with that conflict of cultures which was a major aspect of the Westward Movement is that he shall understand the Indian mind. Without knowledge of how the Indians thought, and of the whole complex of religious belief, tradition, folklore, custom, and attitude within which and according to which they lived, it is impossible for the writer to make of his Indians more than wooden figures, mechanically contrived and operated. A writer grows up with this necessary basic background for understanding the conduct of white men. If he fails to make the actions of his white characters convincing, the fault is usually one of technical incompetence or of sheer carelessness. It is not so for Indian characters. At best a modern writer's comprehension of the old world of the Indians can be but partial. Only by extended and patient study, by a sincere will to understand implemented by earnest effort, can he enter that world at all.

Few famous Indians have been the object of so widely divergent opinions as has Black Hawk. To

many of his contemporaries he was clearly a blood-thirsty savage, vengeful, unreasonable, important only because he was dangerous. But to many others even in his own time there was a firm basis of logic in his attitude, and consistency in his conduct. This divergence of view is illustrated by four novels which deal directly with Black Hawk and his struggle against the coming of the white men which centered in the Black Hawk War.

Two of these novels are by writers whom we cannot claim as Iowans: *The Shining Trail* (1943), by Iola Fuller of Michigan; and *Wind Over Wisconsin* (1938), by August Derleth, who has made the historical backgrounds of his native Wisconsin his major field. Miss Fuller's study of Black Hawk is highly sympathetic, and *The Shining Trail* is outstanding in its grasp and penetration of the Indian world. Miss Fuller's thorough study of all aspects of Indian life is matched by the quality of her writing. *The Shining Trail* will richly reward the reader who is interested in Black Hawk and his times. August Derleth's *Wind Over Wisconsin* is a fast-moving and highly readable romantic novel of the period of the Black Hawk War. Its chief emphasis is on the reaction of white settlers to the crisis, and the author makes no attempt at full or searching characterization of the Indians. In general effect, his treatment of them is along conventional lines.

Two novels by Iowa writers, *As the Crow Flies*

(1927), by Cornelia Meigs, and *Thunder on the River* (1949), by Charlton Laird, include full-length portrayals of Black Hawk, but differ in their views as to the mainspring of his conduct. Miss Meigs finds the clue to Black Hawk's career in a personal experience of his young manhood. In Mr. Laird's interpretation, Black Hawk's clear recognition of the tragic destiny of his race plays a major part. In *As the Crow Flies*, Black Hawk is first of all "the enemy of white men;" the emphasis is on the dark and savage aspects of his character. Mr. Laird's treatment provides a more fully rounded and humanly understandable person. It is interesting that in the three novels noted which stress the figure of Black Hawk — *The Shining Trail*, *As the Crow Flies*, and *Thunder on the River* — the same narrative device is employed for portrayal of the chief: the point of view of an alien adopted into the tribe and befriended by Black Hawk.

Cornelia Meigs

Cornelia Meigs, born in Illinois, early became a resident of Keokuk, Iowa. She has written more than a dozen books of fiction. Most of these are primarily intended for young readers, of high school age and thereabouts; but I have found them all enjoyable and rewarding for what is presumably an adult taste and interest. Miss Meigs has given especial attention in her fiction to the Iowa-

Illinois frontier along the Mississippi, in the period of the earliest settlements; her work in this field very definitely calls for consideration in our present study. She has written some excellent books for younger children, and has done distinguished editorial work in the field of juvenile literature.

Possibly the reason I found *As the Crow Flies* the most interesting and substantial of Miss Meigs' studies of frontier days was the fact that I had read so recently, in THE PALIMPSEST for May, 1955, the biography of Zebulon M. Pike and Dr. Petersen's admirable treatment of Pike's journal of his Mississippi expedition: for this book is built around that expedition, and its most appealing character is the youthfully enthusiastic Zebulon M. Pike.

The central figure of *As the Crow Flies*, however, is an Indian boy named Natzoon. Like the central character of Iola Fuller's *The Shining Trail* — Chaske, the son of a Sioux captive — Natzoon is a Sauk of alien blood: his mother is a Chippewa princess. Like Chaske again, Natzoon becomes a protégé of Black Hawk. From the old chief he imbibes a spirit of implacable hatred of the whites. When he sees Pike, at the latter's council with Black Hawk, Natzoon wavers in his determined hatred of the white race, for the Indian boy is strongly attracted by the candor and courage shown by the red-headed young officer.

However, learning that one of Pike's purposes is to meet and treat with the chiefs of the various tribes along the way, in the interest of peace with the United States and with each other, Natzoon undertakes a mission to precede Pike on his journey and poison the minds of the Indians against him. In the course of this mission he encounters a white boy of his own age, Malcolm Cloud, the son of a British trader, who becomes his friend and ultimately wins him away from his intolerant hatred of the whites.

The most appealing Indian character in *As the Crow Flies* is the Sioux chief, Wabashah, who is the only one of the chieftains interviewed by Pike who gives him a fair hearing and a degree of friendly understanding. Wabashah "had the look of great strength; but he was gnarled and knotted in a fashion quite unlike the smooth slimness of the ordinary Indian brave." He tells Pike: "I have thought over this matter of red man and white, and it is my belief that the Mississippi is a big river and that she has room upon her banks for us all."

"Black Hawk thinks otherwise," declared Pike, studying Wabashah's face for the effect of his words.

"For Black Hawk I have little love," returned Wabashah curtly. "He is one of those who looks only backward toward the past, who does not take thought of the new things which must come. . . .

Let Black Hawk and his warriors go their way and let me go mine. The passing moons will show which of us has the greater wisdom."

Through Chief Wabashah, Natzoon comes to understand the special personal enmity of Black Hawk for the whites; it has originated in a shameful and wanton beating and mutilation inflicted on Black Hawk, when a young warrior, by a band of white outlaws — led, as Natzoon learns, by a Sauk jealous of Black Hawk. Thus Black Hawk's career is made, in this book, to turn upon a personal injury rather than upon the harsh and unfair treatment given his tribe.

The character of Zebulon Pike — red-haired, impetuous, dedicated to his mission and devoted to the welfare of his men — is very attractively presented in *As the Crow Flies*. Perhaps it is somewhat idealized; but in general the portrayal of Pike's Mississippi expedition follows his journal faithfully. This book has both good characters and an engaging story.

A corner of Iowa in the days of earliest settlement, in the Keokuk country, when the Indians still lingered, is the setting for the major portion of *The New Moon* (1924), another of Cornelia Meigs' best Iowa books: though the story begins in Ireland, and pauses in Pennsylvania on the way West. One of the most vivid and appealing incidents of the book occurs at the fair in Pennsylvania, at which the Irish boy, Dick Martin, whose

story this is, buys and tames a ram made vicious by mistreatment. He and his mentor and companion, Thomas Garrity, drive their flock of sheep across the land to Iowa, and begin to farm there. They make friends with the neighboring Sauks: the theme of friendship between the white and Indian boys, breaking down racial barriers, is present here as in *As the Crow Flies*. At the end of the book, Dick has to face the issue of returning to Ireland or remaining in the new land, and decides to stay. Thomas Garrity expresses it:

I have the feeling, which I think you have also, that we and this green valley have grown to be one; that we belong to it, rather than that it belongs to us. . . . It is so the Indians feel, and it is what every settler on the frontier should learn to understand. If you had looked for the making of much money in this venture, if you had been one of those who wishes to grasp as many acres of land as he can, and sell them again, this would be no place for you . . . unless you have wished, not to possess this new country, but to be a part of it, then you are no true pioneer.

A third story by Cornelia Meigs which well deserves our attention here is *Swift Rivers* (1937), a vigorous tale of the great log-rafting days on the Mississippi. The techniques and problems of the rafters are well interwoven with a pleasant story about a young logger from Wisconsin whose unselfish motive in his work marks his character. Though few of the scenes and none of the major characters of this story belong to Iowa, the history

of rafting is so definitely a part of the Iowa background — and has been so largely neglected by writers of fiction — that I believe many Iowans will share my feeling of pleasure in recognizing the merit of this well-told story. For older readers as well as for those younger folk who have been chiefly in her mind as audience, the fiction of Cornelia Meigs has a definite place in our Iowa literature.

Charlton Laird

The most objective view of Black Hawk and the clearest and fullest picture of his times which I have found in fiction come from the pen of a native Iowan. Charlton Laird was born at Nashua in 1901. He attended the State University of Iowa, and later taught at Drake University.

Laird meets precisely the requirements I noted early in this article: that to deal successfully with early history one must be a good scholar as well as a good writer. Holder of a Ph.D. degree from Stanford University and now chairman of the department of English at the University of Nevada, Laird is eminently qualified as a scholar. He is the compiler of *Laird's Promptory*, a dictionary of synonyms on a new plan, and has done much scholarly work in varied fields.

The life of Black Hawk and the history of his period have been objects of almost lifelong interest. Laird grew up in country rich in Indian lore,

opposite Prairie du Chien. There were many Indian mounds on his father's farm. Consistent pursuit of this early interest has qualified him to write with sureness and accuracy. Fortunately, he writes with artistry as well.

Thunder on the River (1949) and *West of the River* (1953) are the first and second novels in a projected series. In their pages we view the career of Black Hawk and the background of related people and events through the experience of representative frontiersmen. Mark Eldridge, the central character of *Thunder on the River*, has come to the frontier like many others — because of trouble at home. He has some degree of education, a good mind and a strong body. His primary purpose is exploitation of the frontier for what he can get out of it. He fights and bargains, seduces the daughter of a French trader, joins a military expedition. One of the high spots of the story, and a very good piece of narrative writing indeed, is the account of the defense of an unfinished fort, by this small force, against greatly superior numbers of Sauk warriors. Especially telling in this incident is the concise but memorable characterization of one Ensign Vasquez, an experienced artilleryman, who saves the lives of most of the garrison at the cost of his own. He is seen very sharply, a quick little man, with his broken English and his rallying cry of "damnfernando!" After his death:

Mark wondered aloud who Vasquez was, and what kind of life was ended by that half-spent bullet. But nobody Mark asked could tell him. Vasquez was just a stranger who had done a brave deed in a land where he would soon be forgotten.

The power to make such briefly seen characters come alive in the reader's mind and to impress them there lastingly is one of the marks of the truly competent historical novelist. It is through such vivid and significant dramatic glimpses that much of the full color and firm texture of sound historical fiction is achieved.

Mark is captured by Black Hawk; and though he has the typical frontiersman's attitude that "the only good Indian is a dead Indian," something about him appeals to Black Hawk or challenges him. The chieftain spares Mark's life, inducts him into the life of the tribe, eventually adopts him as a foster son. Mark takes a Sauk woman as his wife — a comely and intelligent young widow named Little Turtle; but he does so reluctantly and "with his fingers crossed," cherishing meanwhile a sentimental memory of the trader's daughter. When after years of Indian life he is free again, he finds the trader's daughter married to a loutish sot, and comes at the last to appreciate in some degree the fineness and loyalty of Little Turtle.

Again the victim of divided loyalties, Mark is a member of Black Hawk's band in the chief's last

warfare with the whites, tries in vain to obtain for the fleeing Indians mercy if not justice, and is a witness of the massacre at Bad Axe. From the whole experience he gains a new and balanced understanding of the Indian and his fate. It is Laird's consistent use of Mark's point of view, initially wholly hostile but gradually growing into comprehension and sympathy, that gives his portrayal of the controversial figure of the war chief its satisfying objectiveness and convincingness.

Black Hawk and Little Turtle are the only Indian characters fully treated in *Thunder on the River*. Among the white characters, Colonel George Davenport appears under his own name and commands respect. He is introduced by his remark which Mark Eldridge overhears:

"No, thank you, I won't have anything to drink, for being an atheist with no god to forgive my sins, I have to be uncommonly moral."

Mark looked up from his hand of whisky poker to see a man as startling as the remark. He wore old, well-rubbed buckskin which had settled into the sags and hollows of his tall, spare frame. Above the shirt made by some squaw was a high-nosed, aristocratic face, the skin pinked, rather than tanned, with the sun. The man spoke meticulously in a slightly nasal British voice. If he had arrived in a sedan chair with a blackamoor page, Mark would have been no more astounded.

Later Davenport rebukes Mark's shallow assumption that a "dead Indian's a good Indian."

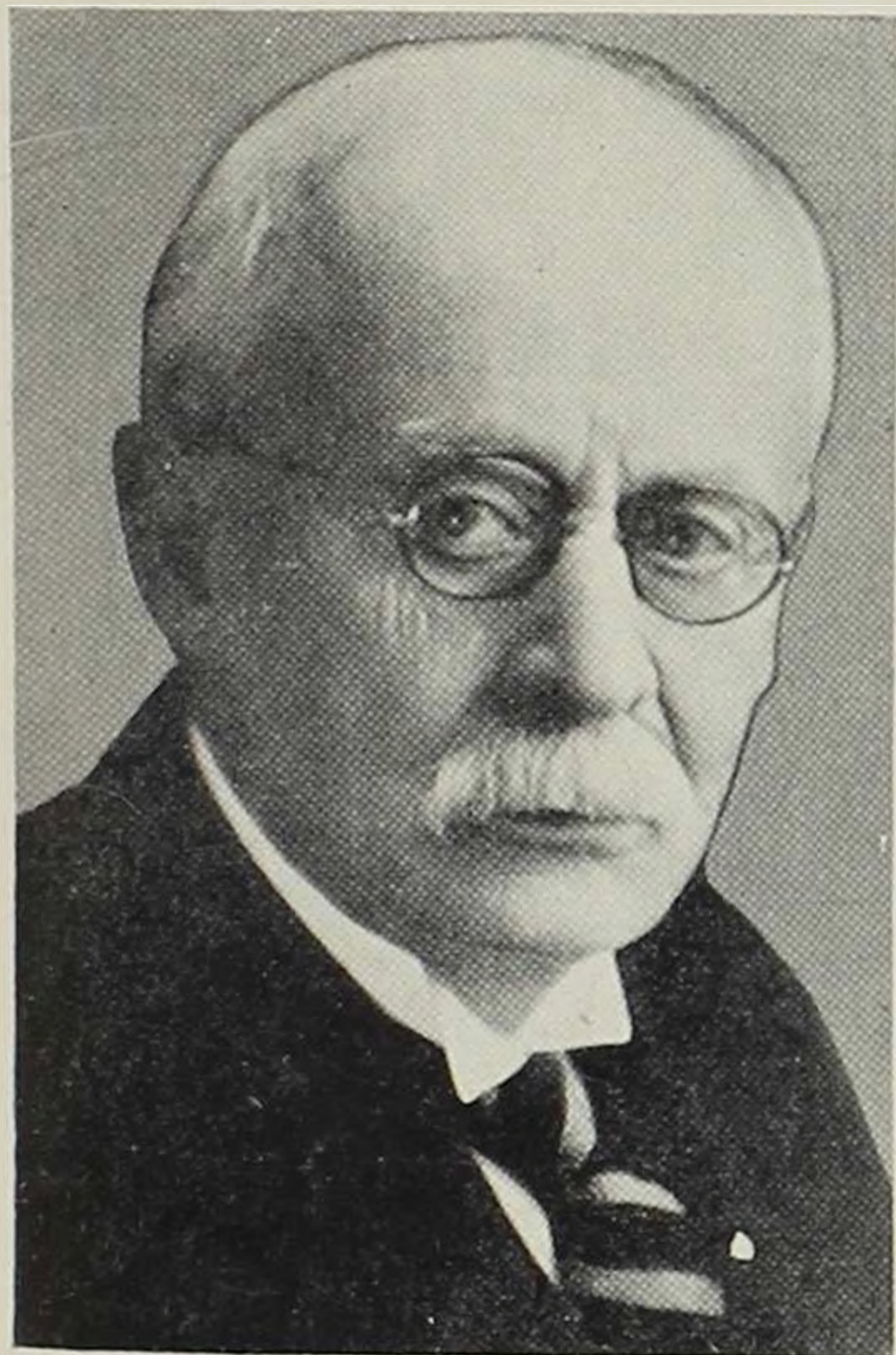
I am not convinced of that, Mr. Eldridge. The Indians of my acquaintance are rather remarkable in the possession of what appears to some white men as a sophisticated concept — that is, a good man is a good man, whatever his color.

Further contribution to the correction of Mark's initial view of the Indians is made by "Judge" [John] Johnson, fur trader and factor whose employee Mark becomes. Johnson is a genial, courageous, and essentially just man. His character is more fully rounded in the second novel of Laird's series, *West of the River*.

This later work shows distinct growth in Charlton Laird's power as an historical novelist. Though it contains no individual episodes of such sustained dramatic intensity as the attack on the fort and the massacre at Bad Axe, in the earlier novel, its characterization is more searching, the narrative line is stronger in the book as a whole, and the interest is more positively sustained.

Mark Eldridge appears again in this novel as a secondary character, but one firmly rendered. He is a friend and advocate of the Indians now, trying against insurmountable odds to help them. The focus of the book is on Paul Boudreau, a young French Canadian fur trader. As the book opens Paul is planning to leave the fur trade, which he hates because only by cheating and debauching the Indians can money be made. He finds his trading post burned, his small fortune in

FOUR IOWA HISTORICAL NOVELISTS



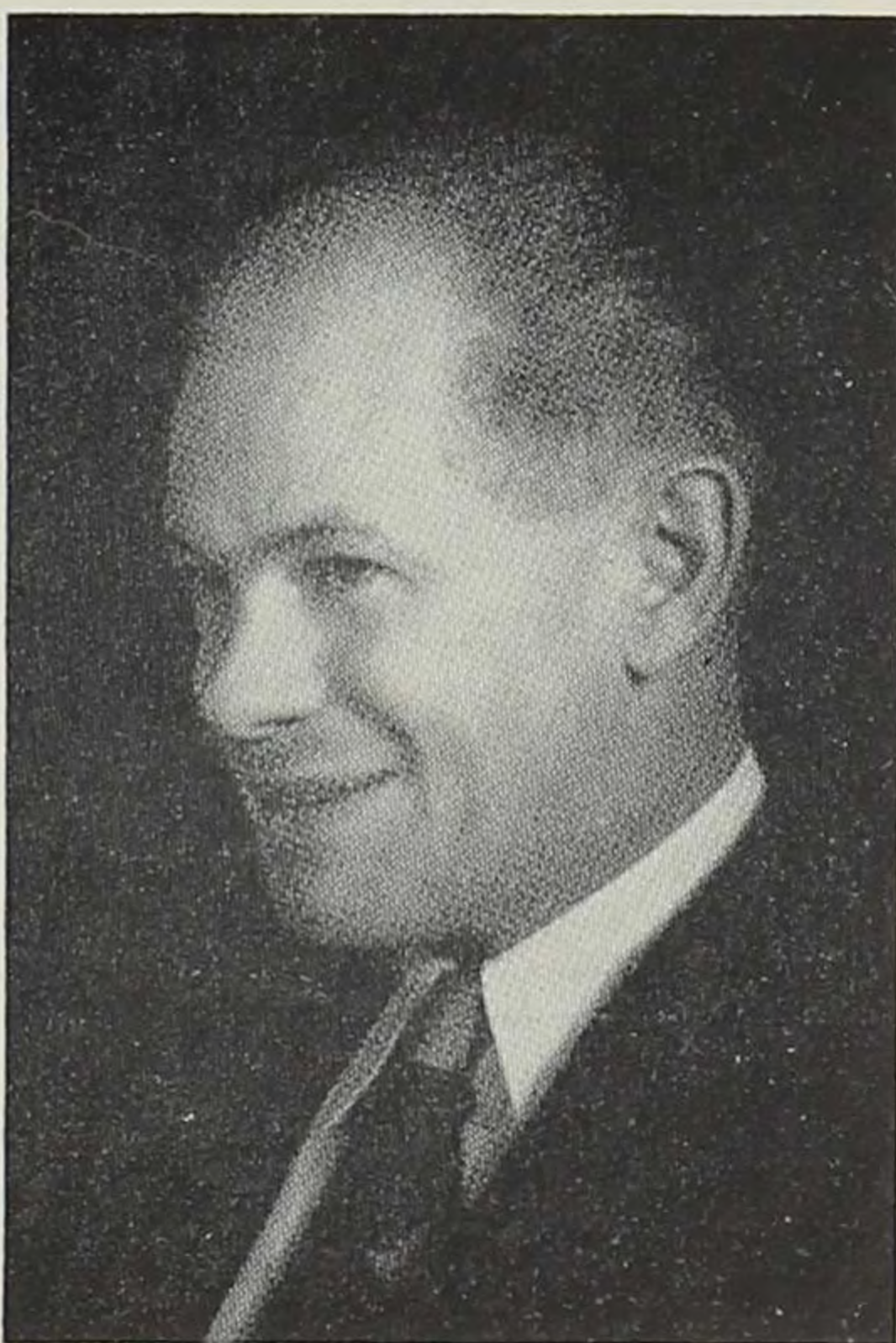
JOHNSON BRIGHAM



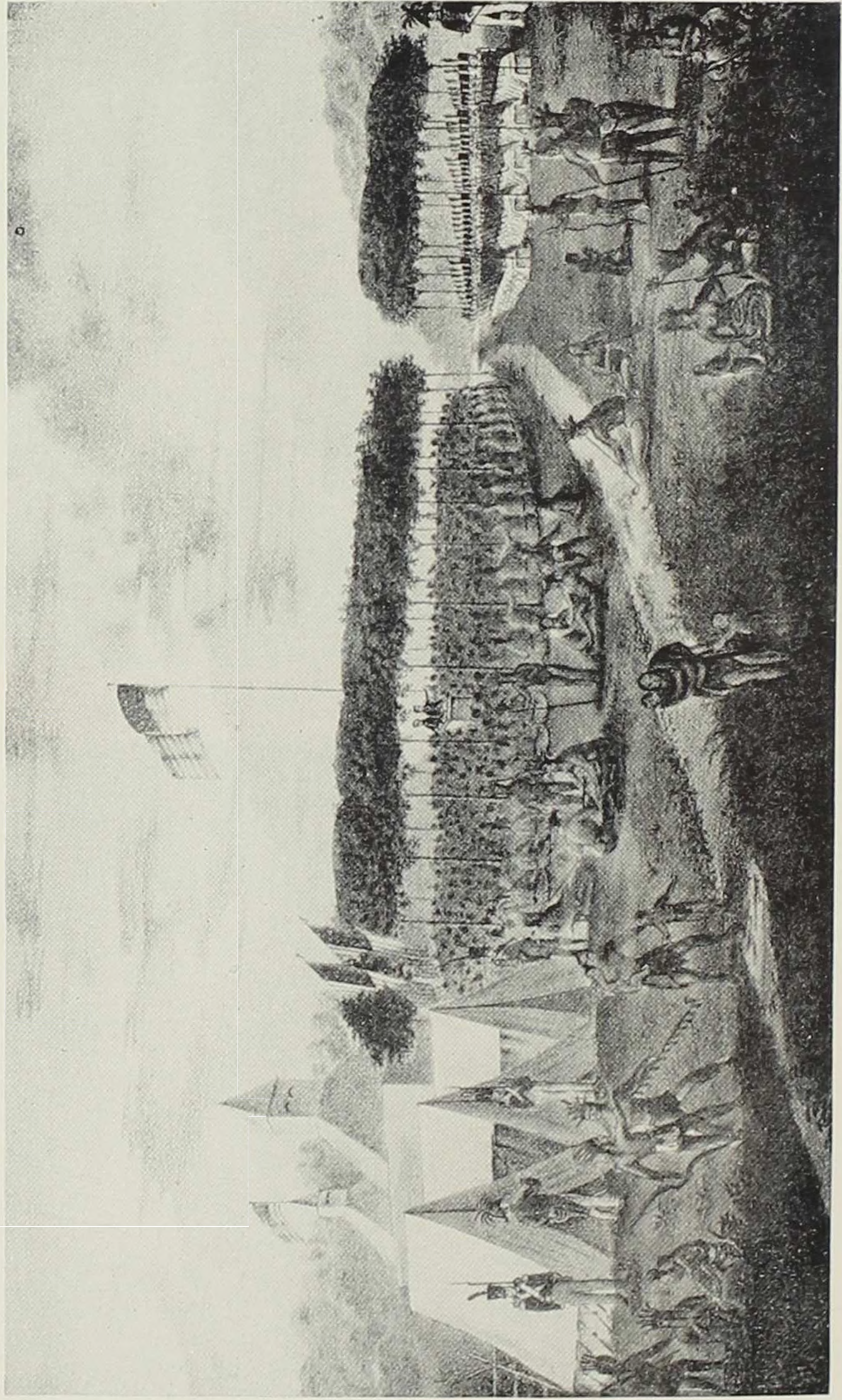
CORNELIA MEIGS



PHIL STONG

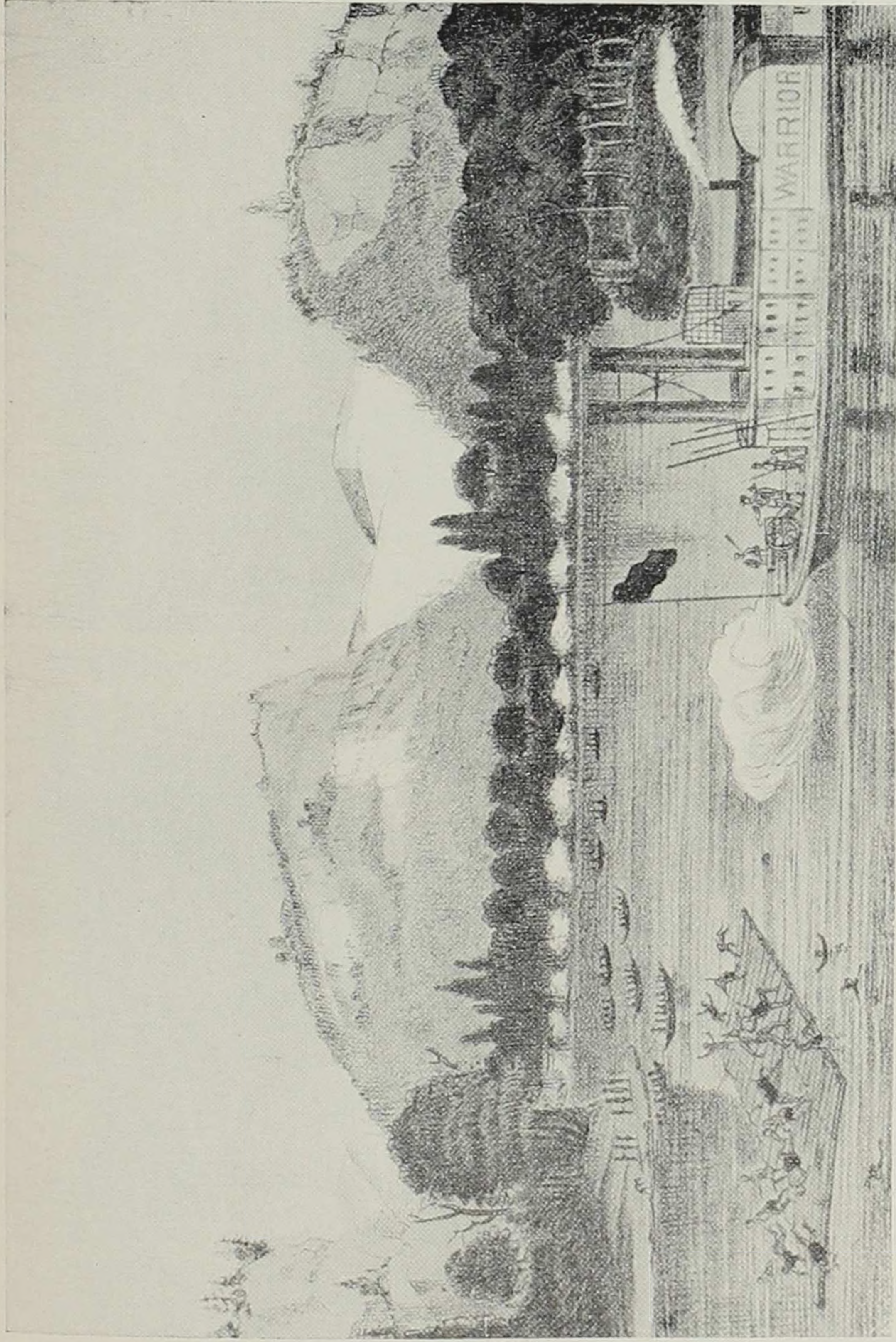


CHARLTON LAIRD



The Great Council of 1825 at Prairie du Chien where the American government sought to bring peace
between the Sioux and the Sauk and Fox.

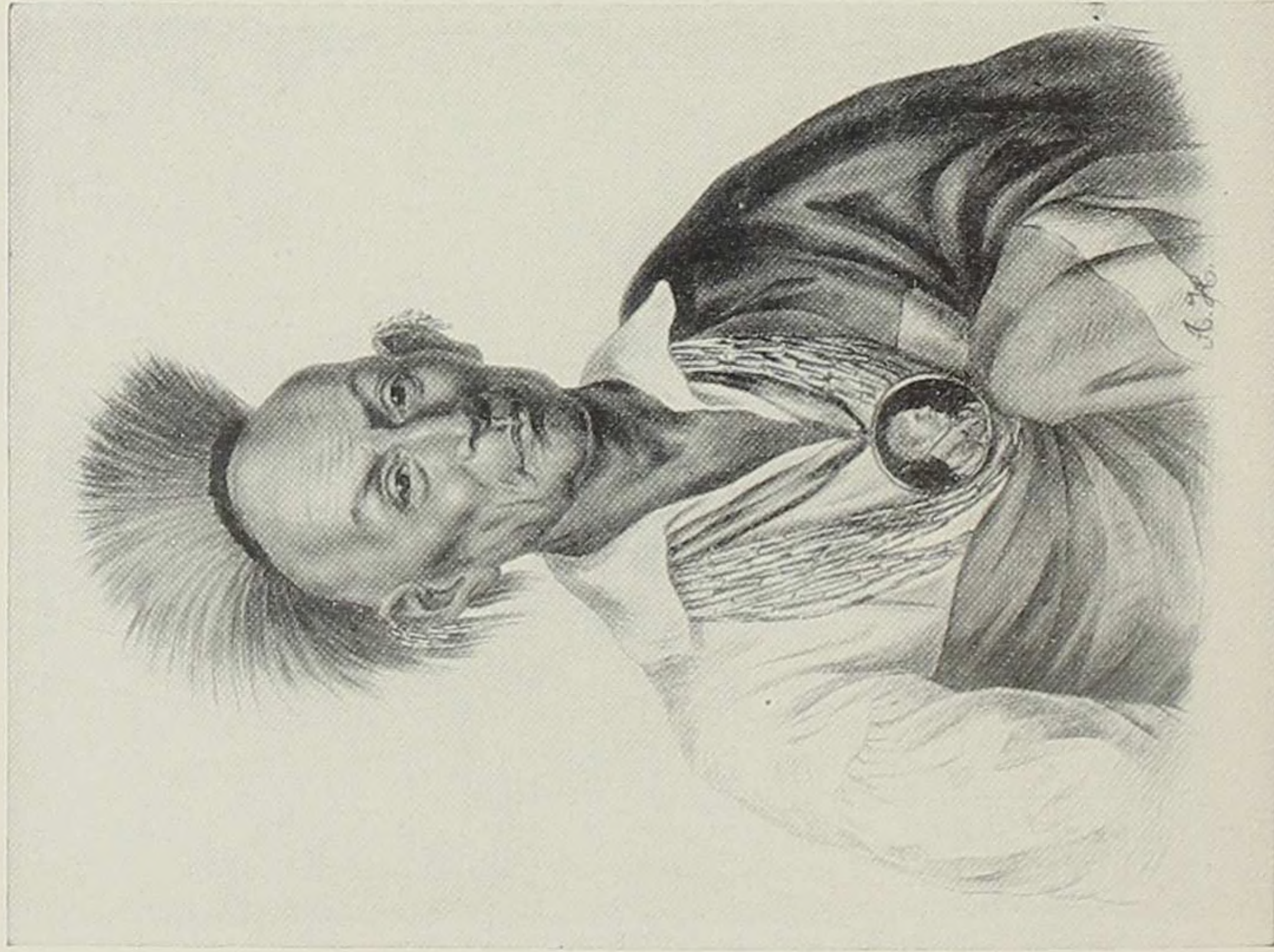
Painting by J. O. Lewis



Painting by Henry Lewis

The Battle of Bad Axe, August 1, 1832, which climaxed the Black Hawk War.

TWO LEADERS OF MEN IN IOWA'S EARLY YEARS



Painting by C. B. King
CHIEF BLACK HAWK



From Fulton's *Red Men of Iowa*
COLONEL GEORGE DAVENPORT

furs destroyed — presumably by agents of the American Fur Company, Astor's men, who are driving out the independent traders.

Paul is at war with himself as well as with circumstances: he has never forgiven the fact of his nameless birth in Quebec, and his boyhood in an orphanage. Under the double stress of this unconquered sense of shame and the immediate disaster, he enters upon two courses of action which deepen his self-contempt: an affair with a woman he comes to despise, the wife of an unscrupulous French trader; and a deliberate large-scale victimizing of the Indians in collusion with an agent of the American Fur Company — the celebrated Half-Breed Steal. He goes among the Indians, who in the past have learned to like and respect him, getting them to "sign" documents acknowledging fictitious debts to the fur company which will enable the company to acquire title to the lands the government has set aside for Indians of mixed blood. In the end he is saved — is led to a course of conduct which enables him to live with himself in peace of mind — largely through the unselfish love of Dollie, the half-Indian daughter of Mark Eldridge.

No Indian characters are given extensive treatment in this novel. "Judge" Johnson is the "hero" of a delightful comic incident, a duel with rocks. Johnson, Eldridge, a completely inept and incompetent government agent named Bunyan, and

young Lieutenant George Wilson are characterized with very definite effectiveness. The total effect of this novel is that of a convincing and richly detailed portrayal of the frontier at a crucial moment — with the demoralization and degradation of the still-dangerous Indians as the sombre background for the working out, in one man's life, of a universal human problem. Charlton Laird's contribution to the literature of early Iowa is substantial and distinguished.

Iowa writers, notably Charlton Laird — whose further work in this field I look forward to with eagerness — have met the challenge posed by the mysteries of Indian character, and have demonstrated the richness of the material for fiction which lies in the conflict between the races as focused on Iowa's eastern boundary. Their work holds an important place in Iowa fiction as a whole.

JOHN T. FREDERICK